

Montgomery beginning to look at schools to share budget pain

By: [Cathy Gainor](#)
Examiner Staff Writer
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Pressure is mounting for Montgomery County's renowned school system to shoulder more of the county's budget problems, with county officials looking at forcing teachers and school staff to take unpaid leave with other county employees.

County Executive Ike Leggett, who is trying to fill a nearly \$1 billion budget gap, is looking to make deep cuts to many county services and doubling the county's energy taxes but would leave the school budget virtually untouched from its current level. The public school's budget accounts for about half of the county's \$4 billion budget.

Leggett has said he is looking to keep a productive long-term relationship with school officials, and "this was not the year" to impose large budget cuts. But several County Council members said they believe there are savings to be had within the school system, with an eye toward lessening the effect of the unpopular energy tax increase or the more severe county budget cuts.

Also in Montgomery

» A County Council committee voted 3-0 to limit so-called "phantom COLAs," or increased retirement payments based on cost-of-living increases that never occurred. A County Council panel also indicated support for shifting more of the burden of a proposed energy tax increase onto residential energy consumers from businesses.

Specifically, the County Council is examining budget proposals that would include furlough days for all county employees, including teachers and other school workers.

Leggett has proposed furloughing most county government employees, except uniformed rank-and-file police officers and firefighters and school employees, for 10 days to save \$15 million. A five-day furlough for all agencies would have savings of about \$50 million.

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"We have to find some equity across the system, and not just for government employees but for all employees," said Council Vice President Valerie Ervin, D-Silver Spring.

There's also been tension between school and government labor officials over the perceived inequities in Leggett's budget.

The County Council controls only how much is given to the school system, not how the money is spent. The school board controls spending, and school officials have been firm in their opposition to furloughs, saying they would be impractical because there would be no corresponding decrease in workload.

"We're not considering furloughs," said school spokesman Dana Tofig.

Tofig said the county's public schools have shared the pain. Enrollment is projected to increase next fiscal year by 2 percent, while the proposed budget remains flat.

"We feel like we're certainly doing our part," Tofig said.

asuderman@washingtonexaminer.com